

On the Cultures in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

SUR LES CULTURES DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT ET DE L'APPRENTISSAGE DES LANGUES ÉTRANGÈRES

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Abstract: As we know that a particular language is associated with particular culture, the language provides the key to the understanding of the associated culture. The language itself cannot be really learned or fully understood without enough knowledge of the culture in which it is deeply embedded. So language and culture must be studied together and great effort must be made at the study of the culture in which the target language operates.

Key words: Culture; Foreign language; Teaching; Learning

Résumé: Comme nous le savons, une langue particulière est associée avec une culture particulière. La langue constitue une clé pour la compréhension de la culture associée. La langue elle-même ne peut être réellement apprise ou complètement comprise sans assez de connaissance sur la culture dans laquelle elle est profondément ancrée. Ainsi, la langue et la culture devront être étudiées ensemble et nous devons faire un grand effort en études de la culture dans laquelle la langue cible est employée.

Mots-Clés: Culture; Langues étrangères; Enseignement; Apprentissage

1. LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Nowadays, more and more people in China have realized that when we learn a foreign language, say English, we are not just puzzled by the linguistic differences between the target language and our

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native language , but also often struck by various cultural features embodied by the two languages in relation to lexical meaning , usage of expressions and pragmatic rules for use of many linguistic forms . These cultural features may be regarded as cultural differences or variables which often constitute cultural barriers in learning a foreign language and using it in communication, particularly in communication with native speakers. Language meaning is closely related to culture, as it is the primary means by which a culture transmits its values, beliefs, concepts, customs and social norms and habits. So we may say that a language, to some extent, is the symbolic representation of a particular culture. Culture, on the other hand, imposes considerable influence on language and the use of language as well. So languages in the world vary from culture to culture not-only in the symbols (words or phonemes), the diversities of structure at various levels. And the grammatical rules they have formed? But also in the way how they are pragmatically used in communication in which they serve adaptive functions. The actual use of language communication is more concerned with such social cultural pragmatic rules as where, when, to whom, what is to say and in what way," .Then it is not a risk to say that nothing more clearly distinguishes one culture from another than its languages Since the knowledge, values and beliefs that constitute a people's culture are habitually encoded and transmitted in the language of the people , it is of great importance for a foreign language learner not only to learn the linguistic knowledge of the target language ,but also to pay much attention to developing his cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity and cultural competence in his study of the target language .

If a foreign language learner is to communicate with an individual from another cultural background, he will need not only to understand the cultural influence at work in the behavior of the foreigner, but also to recognize the profound influence the patterns of his own culture exert over his thought, activities, and forms of linguistic expressions. This means that in foreign language teaching and learning great efforts must be made at both the learner's own culture and the culture in which the target language operates. The learner's own culture may, on the one hand, promote his target language learning, and on the other hand, restrict his correct understanding and appropriate use of the target language. As reported in *Developing Cultural Understanding through Foreign Language-Study*. (MLA Seminar Report, 1953) "The understanding of the culture of a specific country is not, in and by itself, all that the cultural aspects of language study should contribute to a general and literal education." This may suggest three aspects which should be kept in view: One is that learners of a foreign language should gain an understanding of the nature culture, the second is that their cultural bandage should be reduced, and the third is that they should gain a full understanding of their own cultural background. Therefore learners are not expected to lose or give up their confidence in their own culturally related ways or patterns of thinking valuing, instead, they are encouraged to bring about these cultural peculiarities to a level of conscious awareness in relation to those of the target language, and at the same time they fostered to develop tolerance of other viewpoints and other forms or patterns of behavior, and try to understand the cultural variables of the target language. Only when they come to a better understanding of the viewpoints, beliefs, values, customs, social conventions and norms, and forms or patterns behavior of the target culture, can they consciously develop their cultural awareness of the target culture.

2. UNDERSTANDING THE TWO CATEGORIES OF CULTURE

For the purpose of foreign language teaching and learning; culture may be broadly classified into two categories: One is the so-called advanced or formal culture, which is more related to “civilization”, such as geography, history, literature, art, music, politics, economy, education, philosophy, law, religion, moral concepts, inventions and accomplishments in science and technology, etc. These cultural aspects usually constitute cultural knowledge information, which often serves as cultural background knowledge; the other category of culture is the so called popular culture or “deep culture”, which is more related to everyday life including everyday living style, patterns of behaving, both verbal and non-verbal, thought, values, beliefs, social customs and habits, social norms and conventions, etc. Since these cultural aspects are closely related to everyday behavior, both linguistic and non-linguistic, that is, both the way how to use language and the way how to behave non-verbally. They are highly recommended as cultural contents of foreign language teaching and learning. Such deep or underlying culture is cultural communication information, which is potential for cultural confrontation and misunderstanding between foreign language learners and native speakers. Lack of this kind of cultural knowledge often leads to a failure and even break-down in intercultural communication.

3. BEING AWARE OF THE DIFFERENCES

Cultural communication information is so inclusive that it permeates almost all aspects of everyday behavior. This kind of cultural information is deeply and implicitly embedded and manifested in such linguistic routines as greetings, gratitude expressions, apologies, compliments, appointments, invitations, departure, in such culture-loaded words as color terms, kinship words, taboo words and expressions, euphemisms politeness expressions, self-depreciatory expressions, honorifics, address terms and titles, politics oriented words and expressions, and in concepts of privacy, and space 9 etc. These cultural aspects make up the main cultural variables, which may vary greatly in value from culture to culture. They are largely socioculturally associated and their use is pragmatically and socioculturally conditioned.

It is a social routine practice for English speakers to greet friends , colleagues, even family members every time they meet during the same day, which is generally regarded as unnecessary or even hypocritical by Chinese speakers. English speakers often express thanks to anyone who has done them some favor, no matter what the favor is, say, just such a compliment as “you speak excellent English, ”or “ your glasses look very beautiful. ” which is always followed by an English speaker's gratitude expression: “Thank you,,” “Thanks. ” or “ Thank you very much. ” However, a Chinese learner of English is often heard saying, “No, my English is still poor. I cannot speak it well.” as the

response to the same compliment “you speak excellent English.” The negative response would make the English speaker feel embarrassed, unpleasant or even offended. The difference in response to compliments between Chinese and English speakers reflects the difference in culture.

The meanings of many words are closely associated with culture or even culture-conditioned. Take “boy (or girl) friend” for example. It is a popular social activity in English-speaking countries that boys and girls make friends when they reach a certain age. But the word “boy (or girl) friends” may be misunderstood by Chinese learners of English as those who are in love with each other or who are involved in love affairs. Some nouns denoting animals may also vary greatly in associated meaning from culture to culture. “Dragon” in Chinese culture often implies good luck, auspice, power and bright future to Chinese people. This can be shown in many such expressions as “真龍天子，望子成龍，龍飛鳳舞”，which are hard for people from western cultures to understand, because “dragon” in Greek time or Roman mythology is described as a monster that often brings about evil luck or disasters to people.

In Chinese culture, “胖” implies “healthy, strong and rich” as in “心寬體胖”(care-free, contented, healthy and strong) and “發福” (gaining weight). So it is a compliment to say somebody is getting fat. But in English culture, “you’re getting fat” would suggest that you should be on diet. “Fat” in English culture seems to be a taboo word. People, particularly, girls and ladies, in such a culture tend to keep good figures.

4. CONCLUSION

From the descriptions and exemplifications above, it is clear that linguistic routines and many words are closely related to culture. A full understanding of the sociocultural features that are encoded in the linguistic routines, vocabulary and grammar of a language comes only with a better understanding of the culture in which the language operates. In foreign language teaching and learning, the insight into the target culture, the teaching and learning of sociocultural features, particularly the deep culture and cultural communication information and consciously developing cultural awareness and sensitivity are fully integrated with the process of teaching and learning the vocabulary, various linguistic forms and grammar of the target language. Since language is so closely related and interwoven with every aspect of culture, this cultural approach to a foreign language is possible, but only when foreign language teachers are well informed of and alert to the cultural features and variables of the target language. Culturally qualified teachers should bring an awareness of cultural features into every aspect of their teaching; the students are encouraged to absorb such cultural knowledge or information together with their linguistic knowledge of the target language, and cultural awareness and sensitivity should become part of their language learning and language performance.

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